

For the past four years, I have enjoyed visiting one of our church members on a regular basis. As you know, for almost two years, that “regular basis” meant a check in phone call – thanks to cautions around the spread of COVID-19.

Each time I visited, I would be welcomed into this person’s home. We would walk through the house – past a dining room table never set for a meal, but laden with framed pictures, flowers, and pieces of paper with hand written notes or a child’s drawing. Every visit, I would walk into the dining area, I would stop, and I would hear the “latest” news about each of the pictured family members, or shown the handwritten note, or the drawing from one of the grandkids, or asked to smell the flowers from the yard.

The path from entrance into the house to where we’d sit for our visit never changed. From the garage, through the kitchen, past the dining displays, and into a small sunroom. From the initial visit until the last before things changed, I was ushered in and directed to the chair facing the windows. The windows opened a vista that looked out onto a section of a small piece of Maine’s stunning coastline. Water, big rocks, fir trees and open sky! The house sat above the water. Out in the water were anchored boats, and directly to the left was a family member’s house, their dock, lobster traps and everything needed for a day’s catch.

My first visit, I sat almost paralyzed. Stunned by the beauty of everything before me. Noticing that I was somewhat awestruck, the church member commented on the delight of seeing this every day, and in every seasonal expression. My apparent inability to talk created the perfect opening for the host to begin the story of how this family found their way to this spot on the water.

It was a classic “camp” tale! Living and working in one Maine town and securing land somewhere on the water for those weekends away. If I am remembering correctly, it was the paternal great grandparents who secured the land. At first it was a camp site, eventually a building site, that became a small cottage which still stands near the house in which I was sitting.

Before the COVID lockdown, I learned how more land was purchased. Grandparents came alongside the original settlers, and eventually another house was built closer to the water. Other siblings bought land around the original family’s land and a small family commune was created. One set of family stayed year-round and began lobstering. The other family continued living in the communities near where they worked and came to this land on most weekends.

Eventually, the church member I was visiting married, and their spouse now became part of the story of this land.

COVID stopped those visits, and my phone calls during that time of lockdown became more focused on checking in, and less on sitting in person and hearing update stories. This church member was not ZOOM savvy nor did they wish to learn, so we were always communicating during that time on the phone. I couldn't even ask for the laptop to be turned so that I could see that beautiful view.

When vaccinations were made available, and a period of awareness gave us the courage and confidence to restart in-person visits . . . I returned. A comfort to the familiarity of routine: Entering through the kitchen, I walked past a dining table laden with new photos, flowers, handwritten notes and children's drawings. And without asking, because I knew, we went directly to the sunroom. I acknowledged my gratitude to be here again and shared that I'd missed this view and the beauty that surrounded us.

And then the story telling commenced! I'd failed to share with you that our visits were never solely focused on this view, the land, or its origins. We'd talk church, community, local and national politics . . . whatever was on the heart of this person, at the time of our visit.

What never changed, regardless of the order of our discussion topics, was the return to this land, the house, the family's legacy of settling there, and the many memories created in the life experiences shared there.

Over the remaining time I shared with this person before their death, those stories of this land, the house, the family's legacy of settling there, and the memories created kept coming. Each visit held another segment of this history. The land and the family stories would never show up in the same rotation. I might sit down, and the first things we'd talk about was this land and its history. Sometimes I'd get there, and we'd start with national news or local news. During the time when we called our new senior pastor – that was the first thing we talked about. Last fall when I visited our time began with questions around my upcoming Ecclesiastical Council and ordination. Regardless, the time would come when we naturally moved right into a moment of honoring the place and history of where we sat.

One of the last visits I shared was the time when we talked about how we would create a celebration of life for this person upon their passing. We talked a long time about faith, God, spirituality, legacy, and rituals. It was important for this person to

have a time for family and friends to gather, not for mourning but for celebrating all that they'd known and experienced in community during this person's lifetime. I took copious notes. At one point in our time together, there was a noticeable, drawn-out, silence. And then a voice said: "I don't think I want this in a church."

Believing I already knew the answer, I asked anyway: "Any thoughts around where you would like this service to take place?" Silence again. "I have an idea where," I said. With a hand gesture that signaled me to continue, I began: "From my initial visit four years ago, and with each visit to this house since, at some point in our talking you come to that time when you revisit your family's legacy. The original members who found and purchased this land, the ancestors who came after, settled and created more, and the eventual settling of you and your spouse raising your family in this house, on that water, and on this land. This is your church. It has always been your church. You just call it HOME. This is the most sacred place for you.

Any celebration of your life needs to be here, on this land."

On the day of the family's celebration of this person's life, my heart was broken open. Not just in a sadness reflecting that absence of someone whose life had made meaning in yours. My heart broke open in gratitude in knowing that I was guided rightly to offer thoughts around holding this celebration on the land where everything began for this family. And, what moved my heart to open wider in gratitude was in the hearing of each family member's words of remembrance.

Children, grandchildren, other family members and neighbors of this community. In each story shared, I heard enough to recognize immediately where that person's story fit into the history and legacy of this family. With each shared memory, it became more and more evident that we were right where we belonged – on this sacred ground, in this holy place.

I continue to hold deep gratitude around the opportunities to share the sacred words of the psalms. They are a central element of Jewish worship, used in the context of communal and individual prayer. Often sung or recited to express praise, thanksgiving, petition, and contrition. They reflect the faith and beliefs of the Israelites, their relationship with, and understanding of God's mercy, justice, and dedicated love.

Many psalms mirror the experiences of the Jewish people. Recounting the Exodus, the reigns of various kings, and the building of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The psalms use many poetic forms and literary devices such as metaphor, imagery, and symbolism – used to convey their messages successfully. They are integrated into Jewish liturgical practices that make up the basic parts of daily prayers, Sabbath, festival observances, and other religious rituals. And . . . Some psalms are interpreted by both Jews and Christians as holding insights into the anticipated Messiah.

Without giving anything away or spoiling the previews of things to come – I'll just say that we will be spending more prayerful and prayer-filled consideration of the psalms in coming months. This morning, I want to focus just on this aspect:

The Psalms serve as a vehicle for expressing a wide range of human emotions and experiences. Allowing all who hear these words, to relate to the psalmist's experiences and connect with our own feelings in a spiritual context.

Psalm 104 is one of those psalms. I like to refer to it as Creation Story 2.0 As you know, the Genesis accounts cover the creation of all things according to God's design. According to my Hebrew Scriptures studies in seminary, the Genesis accounts were already written during the time when the psalmists were scribing the psalms. So why are they writing a story already known?

Imagine anything in your lifetime that has filled you with an emotional response so intense that it stops you in your tracks. An experience that, each time you revisit it, the original emotions return with such vibrancy and greatness that it's as if you are experiencing these experiences all over again – in their original capacity.

That's what Psalm 104 is. It's the psalmist's experience of being overwhelmed by the entire created order. Its vastness. Its beauty. Its inexplicable origin. It's obvious original author, not the human writing the psalm – but the Creator. It's everything that excites you when you realize you have been given a chance to live amid all this grandeur. Even in its everydayness, every day you experience it anew. That's what Psalm 104 expresses.

Psalm 104 is a hymn! A hymn to the creator and all that has been created. It is a hymn singing the synchronicity of this ordered world. The language of this psalm is the language of creation. God's active involvement. This psalm show us that creation is not a happening of the past. The God of this psalmist's writing is a still-creating God . . . even now! God continues to bring creation to richness through supporting it, providing for it, and enjoying it.

I asked Hector to read selected verses of this psalm. I intentionally took out pieces of the psalm to show that even in its abbreviated version, the intensity and impact remain.

Imagine that what Hector read this morning was a first draft of what would become Psalm 104. And each time the psalmist shared what had been written, someone in the gathering would say: “Wait! Let’s add the part about . . . “

- Write more about how the waters were tamed after the flood. And more about how the rivers will nourish the land and create trees and plants making food for all creatures. Don’t forget to explain how the planets and the seasons move and motivate us.
- Hold on! Tell about God’s relationship with all living creatures, not just the humans. Teach that life begins and life ends. It’s that cycle. The breath of life. God’s breath on all God has created.
- Don’t change the ending. Just help me understand what that last verse means: **“Let sinners be consumed from the earth and let the wicked be no more.”** That really brings the whole uplifting feel of this psalm down – REAL QUICK!

It does, doesn’t it? However, the spirit of God often enlightens the minds of the psalmist and inspires the teachers of Hebrew scripture to engage and courage interpretation: Perhaps verse 35 begins the prayer of someone who loves God, and loves this world created by God. Perhaps this is a prayer against the forces of evil which influence some to work against the desires of the Creator. Perhaps it is a warning: This created order of God’s handiwork, will never accommodate rebellion against and rejection of Creation.

Maybe this is not a condemnation, but a prayer for those who work against God’s design. **May they be saved. May the spirit who created and renews this sacred ground, renew their hearts, and dispel the wickedness that brings ruination and destruction.**

This weekend, we remember those who came before us and lived on this land. Recognizing that energies greater than themselves created the land and all it could give for their living. Welcoming the illuminations of the night, the warmth of the daylight, and the ways to live in harmony with the seasons. Their language was not the language of the psalmists we heard today. Their awareness of a Great Spirit

who animated their world and moved among their people could have provoked hymns of praise the likes of what we heard this morning in Psalm 104.

Their stories became new ways of understanding our place in this created order. Built upon what came before: Life and pain, love, and grief. Sustained by their hopes and dreams.

We are gifted by the psalms, written by people who understand the power of the narrative. It was their hope that what they set to words would help us to understand that we are charged to honor those who went before us, to teach the ones who are with us, and to leave more stories as the new foundation for those yet to come.

Once upon a time . . . when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, . . .